Varlam Shalamov

Lend-Lease Comes to a Soviet Camp

The poet Varlam Shalamov learned about Soviet concentration camps through his own experience. In 1929, at the age of 22, he was sentenced to three years of hard labor for "counterrevolutionary activities." He served the full term. Rearrested in 1937, he was sent to the far northeast of Siberia and spent the next 17 years in Kolyma, most dreadful of Soviet labor camps. (Kolyma is a well-known colloquial term denoting the basin of the Kolyma River in Siberia, known administratively as Magadan Province [562,850 sq. miles]. This area's rich ores—gold, wolfram, uranium, coal—have been developed through slave labor. To one of these camps was sent Andrei Amalrik in August 1971, dissenter and author of the pamphlet Will the Soviet Union Survive Till 1984?.)

After his 1957 rehabilitation, Shalamov returned to creative writing. His poems have appeared in Moskva, Younost', *and* Znamya; *two small collections appeared separately in 1961 and 1964.*

His prose has not been accepted by the Soviet publishing houses. But while not in print in the U.S.S.R., Shalamov's work is known to Russian readers in handwritten and mimeographed form (Samizdat). *Some of it has reached the West.*

The story that follows, as most of the writer's prose, deals with life and death in Soviet concentration camps. Quietly, without rhetoric or exaggeration, the author paints his picture of the isolated world of the camps. Shalamov's stories show the essential difference between an investigation prison and a hard-labor camp. The objective of the first was to destroy the prisoner's spirit, of the second to destroy him physically, by starvation, cold, and a 14- to 16-hour work day. In his story The Tartar Mullah and Fresh Air, *the author notes that the famous Russian revolutionaries Nicholas Morozov and Vera Figner, who spent 25 years in the strictest Csarist jails, came out sane and relatively healthy.*

The same ironic note sounds in his description of the high aristocracy of Soviet prisons, the common criminals. No matter how grave their crimes, they were crimes against fellow citizens, not against the Party. They were therefore considered to be more reliable than political prisoners.

Side by side with these criminal underworld representatives stood those who belonged to the camp administration. In Two Encounters *the author describes a mine manager, Anisimov, who ordered a foreman to be shot for not standing up in his presence and who slapped prisoners with his heavy leather gloves. Another "acquaintance" of Shalamov, the sadistic civilian employee* Engineer Kiselev, *assaulted and mutilated his defenseless slave workers until he fell victim to his own cunning.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Political prisoners, those sentenced under Article 58 for "counterrevolutionary activity," were at the very bottom of concentration camp society. Shalamov recalls several of his fellow inmates in his touching Epitaph—*intellectuals and peasants, former Party dignitaries, Red Army officers, Navy captains and scholars, scientists, philosophers, the French Communist Derfell, the Dutch Communist Fritz David who hardly could understand Russian and lost his sanity; a legion of others, unknown and nameless, but sharing the same fate.*

In these stories, the camp hospital plays a unique part. Here were doctors who really wanted to help their fellow prisoners. The easygoing Dr. Zaytsev became a real physician again the moment he diagnosed an extremely rare case of Aneurism of the Aorta *in a beautiful female prisoner. He checked his diagnosis, he fought, he warned the authorities, but he could not overcome their distrust. Katya Glovatsky fell dead while climbing into the truck that was to carry her back to the mine. It was Vinokurov, director of the hospital, who did his best to change and prolong the* Life of Engineer Kipreyev, *but was told by the general in charge at Kolyma that "talent or not" this prisoner belonged where his "article" indicated he belonged, in the gold mine. In the camp hospital where the elderly Professor Umansky worked, he proudly proclaimed himself* The Mendelist, *a follower of Mendel's genetic theories despite their rejection by the Party.*

Most of Shalamov's short stories are autobiographic and have the ring of truth. He is one of the few survivors, one of the few to survive and bear witness.

MARK LIWSZYC

The fresh tractor trail in the mud looked like the footsteps of some prehistoric beast; it seemed to have little relation to the Lend-Lease delivery of American technical equipment.

Even we concentration camp inmates had heard about these overseas gifts, so confusing to the mind of the camp authorities. Shabby knitted suits, secondhand pullovers and jumpers, collected overseas for the inmates of Kolyma were snatched up by the wives of the Magadan generals,[1] during what would develop almost into a scuffle. These woolen treasures were marked "secondhand" in the inventories, this, of course, seeming far more expressive an adjective than "shabby" or "b/u"—having "been used"—terms only familiar to concentration camp ears. The expression "secondhand" was mysteriously indefinite, as if something had been held in one's hand or kept home in a closet.

Lend-Lease sausage was not at all "secondhand," but we saw the legendary cans only from afar. Lend-Lease pork stew in fat-bellied jars, this we knew very well. Measured according to a complicated table, stolen by greedy supervisors, counted and recounted, measured out again before being put into the cauldrons, there to be boiled soft and transformed into some mysterious substance smelling of anything but meat—Lend-Lease pork stew excited our eyes but not our taste buds. Pork stew from the camp cauldron had no taste at all. The inmates' stomachs preferred native food, such as old, rotten venison that could not be boiled soft in the seven camp cauldrons. Venison did not disappear or evaporate like pork stew.

Lend-Lease oatmeal we approved of and ate. But we received no more than two tablespoons of porridge per head.

Lend-Lease technical equipment arrived, too. Equipment that one could not eat—uncomfortable tomahawk hatchets, very comfortable short-handled spades, non-Russian handles that spared the loader's strength.

[1] Magadan, the capital city of Magadan Province, which includes the basin of the Kolyma River, is an administrative center for all Kolyma concentration camps.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

These spades were immediately attached to long handles in accord with the local style, and flattened so that they could pick up more soil.

Glycerine in barrels! Glycerine! On the very first night the watchman ladled out a pailful of liquid glycerine and sold it to the inmates as "American honey"; made himself a nice profit, too.

Via Lend-Lease there also came huge, black ten-ton Diamond-T trucks and trailers with iron sides, and five-ton Studebakers that could easily climb any hill. They were the best trucks in Kolyma. Day and night these Studebakers and Diamond-T's transported American Lend-Lease wheat, in beautiful white linen bags with the American eagle sewed on them, along the thousand-mile route. They baked pudgy, tasteless "rations" with this flour. Lend-Lease bread had a remarkable quality. Everyone who ate it stopped going to the toilet; once every five days one's stomach exploded in what could scarcely be called a bowel movement. So completely did the prisoners' stomachs and bowels absorb this splendid white bread with its mixture of corn, bonemeal, and other doubtful ingredients, which were perhaps, in reality, mere human hope leaving no residue. The time had not yet come to count all the people saved by this overseas wheat.

The Studebakers and Diamond-T's used up a lot of gas. But gas, a light aircraft gas, also came via Lend-Lease. Soviet GAZ cars had been reequipped for wood fuel. Two stove pipes, installed near the motor, were heated by "churka," wood cut into small pieces and dried in a special stove. The word "churka" came into widespread usage, and several "churka" enterprises headed by party members were set up. Each such enterprise was staffed by a chief engineer, a regular engineer, a labor overseer, a planner, and accountants. I do not recall how many "sloggers" were in each enterprise—two, more likely three, for each shift. They prepared the "churka" using a circular saw; Lend-Lease supplied technical equipment; it brought us a tractor and, with it, a new word for the Russian language, "bulldozer."

The prehistoric beast was unchained and let loose on its caterpillar tracks. This was an American bulldozer with a wide blade, the moldboard, a hanging metal shield that shone like a mirror. This mirror reflected the sky, the trees and the stars, along with the dirty faces of the prisoners. Even the armed guard approached this overseas wonder and said that he could shave in front of the iron mirror. But we weren't thinking about shaving, such an idea never occurred to us.

The sighs and groans of the new American beast resounded for a long time in the frosty air. The bulldozer coughed in the frost, its anger growing. Finally it began to puff and to howl, then it boldly dashed ahead, crushing the mounds in its path and easily rolling over the tree stumps. This was overseas help.

No longer would it be necessary for us to "trel" the massive logs of Daurya larch. Timber and wood lay scattered about the forest on the mountain slope. The cheerful-sounding phrase "to trel" meant dragging and stacking logs by hand, in Kolyma a back-breaking and unbearable task. "Trelling" logs by hand over the mounds and along the twisting, narrow paths was beyond human strength. There was a time until 1938 when horses were used here, but horses bear up in the North less successfully than humans. Because they could not stand the "trelling" they died. And now the knife of the overseas bulldozer would come to our aid—or was it really there to help us?

None of us dared dream that he would be assigned an easy task instead of the unbearable "trelling," so hated by everyone. No. They would simply increase the daily quota of timber we had to cut. In any case, we would have to do something else, equally humiliating and despicable, as is all labor in the concentration camp. The American bulldozer would not cure our frostbitten fingers. But perhaps American "Solidol" could! Oh, Solidol, Solidol! The barrel in which this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heavy truck lubricant had been brought was instantly attacked by a crowd of *dokhodyaga.*[2] Its bottom was knocked out on the spot.

The starving prisoners said it was Lend-Lease butter. When finally a watchman was posted, less than half the barrel remained and the authorities drove off the crowd of *dokhodyaga* with shots. The lucky ones gulped down the "Lend-Lease butter," refusing to believe it was simply a truck lubricant. After all, American bread was also medicinal and tasteless except for a strange iron flavor. So all those who had succeeded in touching the Solidol licked their fingers for the next few hours, swallowing the tiniest pieces of the overseas delicacy with its rock-like taste. After all, a rock was also born not as a rock but something soft and buttery! A being, not a substance. Only in old age does a rock become substance.

Nothing happened to those who had gotten their hands into the barrel. The well-trained stomachs and bowels of Kolyma were easily able to cope with Solidol. As to what was left over, a guard was posted there since Solidol happened to be food for machines, machines being much more important to the state than people.

So here was one of those beings that came to us from beyond the ocean. Three hundred men passionately envied the prisoner sitting at the steering wheel of the American tractor. They envied Grinya Lebedev. There were tractor operators among the prisoners more skilled than Lebedev, but all were "Article 58" cases, *"literik," "lityorka."*[3] Grinya Lebedev happened to be a common criminal, a patricide to be exact. Each one of the three hundred envied his luck: to sit at the wheel of the well-oiled tractor, to "chirr" and roar through the timber-cutting area.

Timber cutting went on and on. In Kolyma it followed the beds of the streams. Here, secluded from the wind and reaching for the sun out of the darkness of deep ravines, trees grow high. Those in the wind and full light of the muddy mountain slopes are broken and deformed as they lean toward the sun, exhausted in their perpetual struggle for a piece of thawed-out soil. The trees on the mountain slopes look fit for a museum of strange and freaklike phenomena of nature. Only in the dark canyons of the mountain riverbeds do the trees gain in height and strength. Like prospecting, lumbering sticks to gold-bearing streams. A stream, a scoop, a prospecting pan, temporary quarters, a violent destructive push during which the lumberer denudes river and countryside of timber for three centuries to come while the prospector empties them of gold forever.

While reforestation was feasible elsewhere, in Kolyma, where larch trees take three hundred years to mature, it was impractical in the wartime rush sparked by intensive Lend-Lease activity.

Many logs as well as sawed and piled-up wood remained in the forest. The snow hid any number of heavy logs that had fallen when prisoners could not lift them onto their lean and fragile shoulders. Feeble human hands, even dozens of such hands, could not raise a two-meter log to the shoulders of others, to be lugged tens of meters over mounds, ditches, and pits. Plenty of wood had to be abandoned during the backbreaking toil of "trelling." But now the bulldozer would give us a helping hand.

In Kolyma, however, the bulldozer's first assignment on Russian soil would be completely different. We all watched as the bulldozer turned left and began to climb the terrace, the ledge of rock where the old road led to the camp cemetery. We had been driven to work this way hundreds of times.

For the last few weeks it had not occurred to me why they had been leading us to work by another route instead of along the familiar path, well-trodden by the heels of the armed escorts and by the "chunis" or thin rubbers

[2] A camp prisoner, exhausted, desperate, unable to work and doomed to die soon.

[3] Concentration camp terms denoting political prisoners; Article 58 means "counterrevolutionary" activity; different types of such activities are labeled by letters (*litera*).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which the prisoners wore on their bare feet. The new route was twice as long as the old one and full of hills we had to climb up and down. We were exhausted before we reached our place of work, but nobody asked why another route was being taken. It must be so; such was the order. We crawled on all fours, clutching at the rocks and bloodying our fingers.

But now I saw and understood. I thanked God for giving me the time and strength to see this.

The mountain slope was stripped bare. The snow, still not deep enough, was blown away by the wind. The last of the tree stumps was uprooted. Dynamite charges set under the biggest stumps sent them flying. The smaller stumps were uprooted with crowbars and still smaller ones were simply pulled out by hand. Thus the mountain was stripped bare and converted into a gigantic stage for the performance of a concentration camp mystery play.

A stone pit, the common prison grave, full of preserved corpses, had been reopened by the disappearance of the topsoil. The bodies had slid down the mountain slope, revealing the secret of Kolyma.

In Kolyma dead bodies are not committed to earth but to Stone. Stone is more reliable than earth, especially when fortified by Permafrost. It both preserves and exposes secrets. Each of our dear ones who had perished in Kolyma, each who had been shot or beaten to death, or wasted away from hunger, might have been identified decades later. There were no gas ovens in Kolyma. Corpses lay waiting in the doubly hardened realm of Stone and Permafrost.

Whole teams of prisoners in the gold fields in 1938 were put to work digging such graves, incessantly drilling, blowing up, deepening the huge, grey, cold stone pits. It was an easy task to dig graves then. There were no stiff assignments, no daily quotas designed to kill people and calculated on a fourteen-hour work day. It was easier digging graves than standing in the ice-cold water of the gold mine wearing only rubber "chunis" on one's feet, working at the camp's major enterprise, removing the primary metal.

These huge, stonepit graves were filled to overflowing with dead bodies. Corpses that had not decayed, naked skeletons covered with filthy skin, scratched raw and bitten all over by lice.

Neither the Stone nor the North would let the corpses into their womb. Finally, yielding to force, defeated and humiliated, the Stone had promised to keep its secret, but harsh winters, hot summers, the winds and the rain, at work for six years, had wiped away the secret by casting the corpses forth from the Stone. The earth had opened its mouth to reveal its underground storerooms. In Kolyma not only gold was hidden, not only lead, wolfram, and uranium, but also preserved human bodies.

Perhaps straining after resurrection, these human bodies had shifted down the slope. Much earlier, from the other side of the stream, I had seen objects moving, some obstructed by branches and rocks. Seen through the sparse, hewn-out forest I had thought they were logs still to be piled up.

Now that the mountain lay stripped bare its secret was revealed. The grave had yawned and the corpses moved down the slope. Near the tractor trail a new, huge, mass grave had been carved out. By whom? No one had been sent from the barracks to do it. It was a very large grave. If all my comrades and I should freeze to death, or however we were to die, there would be enough room for us in this new grave.

The bulldozer was shoveling the corpses together, thousands of skeletonlike corpses, frozen stiff. Everything in a state of preservation—crooked fingers, gangrenous toes discharging puss, stumps of frostbitten limbs, skin scratched raw and blood-stained, eyes inflamed with hunger.

My exhausted mind tried to understand. How could such an enormous grave exist in this area? It seemed to me there were no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gold fields here. I should know; I was an old-timer in Kolyma. But later it occurred to me that I knew only a small part of this world, a scrap defined by the barbed-wire zone and watchtowers that reminded one of Moscow's tentlike period of architecture. Moscow skyscrapers are watchtowers guarding Muscovite prisoners. Which guard house towers came first, the Kremlin's or those in the concentration camps?

I realized that I knew only a very small, insignificant part of this world. I became aware that a mere 20 kilometers away might stand the hut of survey geologists, prospecting for uranium or gold that might one day employ thirty thousand additional prisoners. Deep in the mountains much is hidden.

Then I remembered putting out grass fires and, by contrast, the intense blooming of the *taiga* in summer whose foliage together with the grass may hide all human actions, good or bad. I remembered that grass is more forgetful than man. If I forget, surely the grass will. But Stone and Permafrost will not.

Grinya Lebedev, patricide, operated a tractor skillfully. With confidence he drove the well-oiled American tractor. Grinya Lebedev performed his task thoroughly, pushing the corpses up to the edge of the grave, then the shiny knifeshield of the bulldozer shoved them into the pit and he withdrew to "trel."

The authorities had decided that the first job of the tractor acquired by American Lend-Lease would not be a simple job in the woods, but a more important one.

The work was over. The bulldozer had pushed a mass of rocks and pebbles over the new grave under which the corpses were once again concealed beneath Stone. But they had not vanished.

The bulldozer was approaching us. Grinya Lebedev, common criminal, patricide, did not deign to look at us, Article 58 prisoners. Grinya Lebedev had carried out his official assignment. Pride and satisfaction with a job well-done were clearly written on Grinya's stony face.

The bulldozer roared past us; not a scratch, not a mark on its mirrorlike knife.

Translated by MARK LIWSZYC □

"I appeal to you with respect and hope."

ANDREI SAKHAROV

[At the Award Dinner of the Social Democrats, U.S.A. on February 1st, the courageous Soviet dissenter Andrei Sakharov, was presented with the Norman Thomas Freedom Award in memory of the great American civil libertarian.

In accepting his award in absentia, Andrei Sakharov described the "extremely grave situation" facing the Soviet dissenters and appealed for support in the West for a six point program to aid their cause.
(space does not permit us to reprint the program here but it can be obtained from the address listed below.)

Public support in the West and the bravery of Sakharov and others keep the dissident struggle in the Soviet Union alive. This support must grow. It is a matter of life and death!

Bayard Rustin, Chairman
Dr. Robert Wallace Gilmore, Treasurer
Andrei Sakharov Campaign
sponsored by Social Democrats, U.S.A. 12th Floor, 112 E. 19th St., N.Y., N.Y., 10003 (212) 674-3700

Yes, I want to help the campaign and I will ask my organization to become active in it.

☐ **Enclosed is $_____ to reprint and distribute this statement as widely as possible, and to build public suport for the Soviet dissenters.**

☐ **Please send me information about the Soviet dissenters and suggestions for activities on how to help in my community.**

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
(Please make checks payable to Andrei Sakharov Campaign)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED